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Viewing cable 07SANJOSE361, COSTA RICA: NEXT ANTI-CAFTA PROTEST ON 26 FEB

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
07SANJOSE361	2007-02-23 19:28	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy San Jose

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.nacion.com/2011-03-03/Investigacion/NotasDestacadas/Investigacion2697430.aspx>
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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7320
INFO RUEHZA/WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA PRIORITY 3931

C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN JOSE 000361

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DEPT FOR WHA/CEN, WHA/EPSC AND DS/IP/WHA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/14/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ELAB](#) [ASEC](#) [PINR](#) [CS](#)

SUBJECT: COSTA RICA: NEXT ANTI-CAFTA PROTEST ON 26 FEB

REF: A. 06 SAN JOSE 2431

[1](#)B. SAN JOSE 175

Classified By: CDA Russell Frisbie per reasons 1.4 (b & d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) 1. (C) The next anti-CAFTA protest is scheduled for Monday, February 26, with the locus of action likely to be San Jose. Organizers promise a larger event than last October's protest, but predicting turnout is impossible in advance. The GOCR has vowed to prevent disruption of essential services (not anticipated) and roadblocks (probable) while respecting the right of citizens to protest. Costa Rican security officials are confident they can prevent major disturbances. With assistance from Post (rented busses) as well as Colombia (Post-funded training) and Taiwan (vehicles and equipment), the police have improved their ability to respond to the protests. On the other side, labor union leaders privately acknowledge that the event probably will not be a decisive blow against CAFTA ratification. A less antagonistic but equally determined new leadership - the National Front - has become the public face of the CAFTA opposition, seeking a "time out" to develop a national consensus on the GOCR's entire development agenda. PAC leader Otton Solis has urged CAFTA opponents to take to the streets in a celebration of Costa Rican democracy. Assuming no violence, both sides will likely declare victory, but momentum seems to favor the GOCR. Anti-CAFTA forces may try to mount further (and perhaps more violent) protests later, especially around the ratification vote. END SUMMARY.

ANOTHER ANTI-CAFTA MARCH

[1](#)2. (U) Both sides are squaring off for the next anti-CAFTA protest, scheduled for February 26. Led by the "National Front of Support for the Fight Against CAFTA," an umbrella group drawn from university students and faculty, labor unions, and members of various social organizations, the protesters plan to focus most of their action in San Jose. They plan to assemble at the old national soccer stadium and march through downtown to rally at the Legislative Assembly. The organizers hope to far exceed the 6-9,000 person crowd assembled for the last protest, October 23-24 (Ref A). As in the October protests, a few additional marches and attempted road blockages may take place around the country. The GOCR has made it clear, including in stern television advertisements featuring Minister of Presidency Rodrigo Arias, that the public's right to protest peacefully will be honored fully, but no disruption to essential services or roadblocks will be allowed.

UNIONS: SIZE DOES NOT MATTER

[1](#)3. (SBU) PolCouns and Poloff met with public employees, labor union leader and outspoken CAFTA critic Albino Vargas and two associates on February 7. Vargas, as feisty as ever, repeated his familiar mantra: Since the GOCR has refused a true national dialogue, CAFTA must be "decided in the streets." The Agreement is illegitimate, anyway, because it was negotiated "in secret" by the former administration. And, the Arias Administration has no right to "impose" CAFTA on Costa Rica because a) Arias "stole" the 2006 election and b) Arias should not have been allowed to run again in the first place. When asked why he continued to boycott meetings with Arias and other union leaders, Vargas insisted the President never listens to their concerns. When asked about the impact if the protest turnout is lower than expected

(based on just-published CID-Gallup data showing that only six percent of those polled supported the protests), Vargas insisted "numbers don't matter". Although he dismissed the CID-Gallup figures as biased, Vargas acknowledge that the February 26 events probably will not be decisive. He expects the GOCR will claim victory no matter the turnout.

NATIONAL FRONT: NEW FACE OF THE OPPOSITION?

14. (U) The National Front, led by Eugenio Trejos, Dean of the Technology Institute of Costa Rica at Cartago, has increasingly become the public face of the opposition, part of a clear effort to play down the role of the more antagonistic unions. In a long meeting with Polanco and Poloff on February 21, Trejos said he and other Front leaders had met with a wide range of protest organizers and GOCR officials, including Public Security Minister Fernando Berrocal, to urge that the events be peaceful. Trejos was optimistic that ex-presidents Luis Alberto Monje (PLN) and Rodrigo Carazo (PUSC) would join the protests to lend them more gravitas. Trejos was fairly confident that the San Jose events would remain peaceful, but he warned that the Front could not "guarantee" calm everywhere, especially in the hinterlands, and particularly if the police "provoked" violence.

15. (U) Trejos echoed the legitimacy concerns about the Arias Administration raised by Vargas. Insisting that the GOCR's 38-seat working coalition in the Assembly was weak, he said the best case scenario for CAFTA opponents would be to peel away one or two of those legislators, so the GOCR would have to halt CAFTA, "listen to the people," and seek a new national "consensus," not only on CAFTA, but on the GOCR's entire development agenda. Trejos said a national referendum would be the ideal vehicle to help build the consensus, but admitted that it wasn't clear a referendum related to CAFTA was constitutionally feasible. A team of opposition legal experts are studying the issue, he said. For CAFTA opponents, the GOCR's pushing ahead to ratification would be the worst case scenario, according to Trejos. A ratification vote in April might provoke real violence, he warned. The contest at hand, he maintained, is about the "60% of the population that has not really made up their minds" about CAFTA. Like Vargas, Trejos also dismissed the recent CID-Gallup results (that 62% of those who are familiar with CAFTA support it.)

GOVERNMENT: READY BUT WARY

16. (SBU) The GOCR seems ready for the protests. The intelligence service is confident it knows who the real troublemakers will be, but is still wary. In a detailed pre-protest strategy session convened by Minister Berrocal on February 3 (the first such planning session in our memory), police officials were worried that the February 26 events might be more disruptive than those of last October. Radical elements outside of the organized anti-CAFTA groups, for example, might block roads in defiance of the GOCR's warnings. Alternatively, a group of students perhaps aided by opposition legislators - could "peacefully" take over the Assembly building, forcing the police to remove them, at the risk of looking "too aggressive." Security and screening has been tightened at the building to prevent this. NOTE: Poloff will also attend the final pre-protest strategy meeting on February 23.

USG (AND COLOMBIAN) ASSISTANCE

17. (C) As in the case of the October protests, mobility is the chief concern of the police. With approximately 450 riot police available in San Jose, but only 160 of those fully-equipped (and recently refresher-trained by

Embassy-funded Colombian police instructors), the police may need to move resources quickly to potential traffic choke points and protest hot spots throughout the capital. The Ministry of Public Security thus asked Post to rent buses for their use, using available INL funds. Post will provide 10 buses, for February 26 only. (The police do not believe they will need the buses after that.) Berrocal believes that managing the image of the demonstrations is crucial and that the government will win this showdown if security officials are not provoked into violence with protesters. Berrocal is so determined that he told national police commanders that "if blood must be shed, let it be our blood first." Berrocal has announced publicly that police will not be armed during the protests.

18. (C) COMMENT: The Colombian police instructors, provided with the very helpful assistance of Embassy Bogota and the Colombian Embassy here, greatly boosted the confidence of the police anti-riot personnel. Poloffs observed this firsthand during a visit to the National Police training facility in Guanacaste. Adding to the police's confidence was the first tranche of security assistance provided by Taiwan. An array of 125 motorcycles, 60 pick-up trucks and other equipment was received in a public ceremony on February 22, deliberately timed to be a signal to protesters. END COMMENT.

IMPACT ON THE ASAMBLEA?

19. (SBU) CAFTA opponents have maintained pressure on legislators, even in advance of the big day on February 26. On January 23 and February 12, union leaders including Vargas tried to disrupt proceedings in the Assembly by noisily and personally threatening legislators from the visitors, gallery. After trying to reason with the protesters, Assembly President Fernando Pacheco called the police, leading to a brief, but well-publicized scuffle as the gallery was cleared. CAFTA opponents, including Trejos, decried this use of "excessive force." Meeting with the Ambassador on February 16, PLN faction chief Mayi Antillon said the noisy union leaders had overplayed their hands by being "too disrespectful." She acknowledged, however, that some individual legislators - such as Jose Manuel Echandi of the PUN -- were concerned for their safety and would be allowed to be "absent" on February 26. (Echandi also requested police protection near his residence.) Antillon acknowledged that the protests, if widespread enough and violent at all, could make some members of the GOCR,s working coalition "waiver" a little. She remains confident, however, that the Asamblea can complete the first ratification vote by April. Once that is done, she predicts that the opposition will lose most of its steam.

THE PAC,S OTTON SOLIS: WILL HE OR WON'T HE?

110. (U) And what about PAC party leader Otton Solis, who vowed to join the protests when the CAFTA bill was voted out of committee last December, and who has taken a higher anti-CAFTA, pro-CBI profile since his January visit to Washington? In a lengthy radio interview on February 6, Solis said his PAC party was not organizing anything, but would join the protests if they were convoked under "correct terms," i.e., as "day for Costa Rica." He has since been coy about his own participation, and whether PAC would take any responsibility for keeping the protests peaceful. Minister of Government Arias insisted to the media that if Solis joined the march, then his participation (as leader of the main opposition party) should be "a guarantee that the march will be peaceful." In a TV commercial aired on February 22, however, Solis urged those concerned about CAFTA to take to the streets on Monday in a peaceful celebration of Costa Rican sovereignty.

COMMENT

¶11. (SBU) Both sides seem ready and determined for Monday's events. Assuming no violence, both sides are likely to claim victory. Momentum seems to favor the GOCR, however, based on the increased discipline and confidence in the Assembly (Ref B), the better organization and higher confidence of the police, and the CID-Gallup polling data (generally in support of CAFTA, against the protests and unfavorable to the more notorious union leaders). The opposition cannot keep holding "rehearsals." But, if the GOCR does not blink in the Assembly (and we don't think it will), then the anti-CAFTA forces may try to mount further (and perhaps more violent) protests later, especially around the ratification vote. The CID-Gallup data also shows that most Costa Ricans expect more turbulence before CAFTA is ratified.
FRISBIE